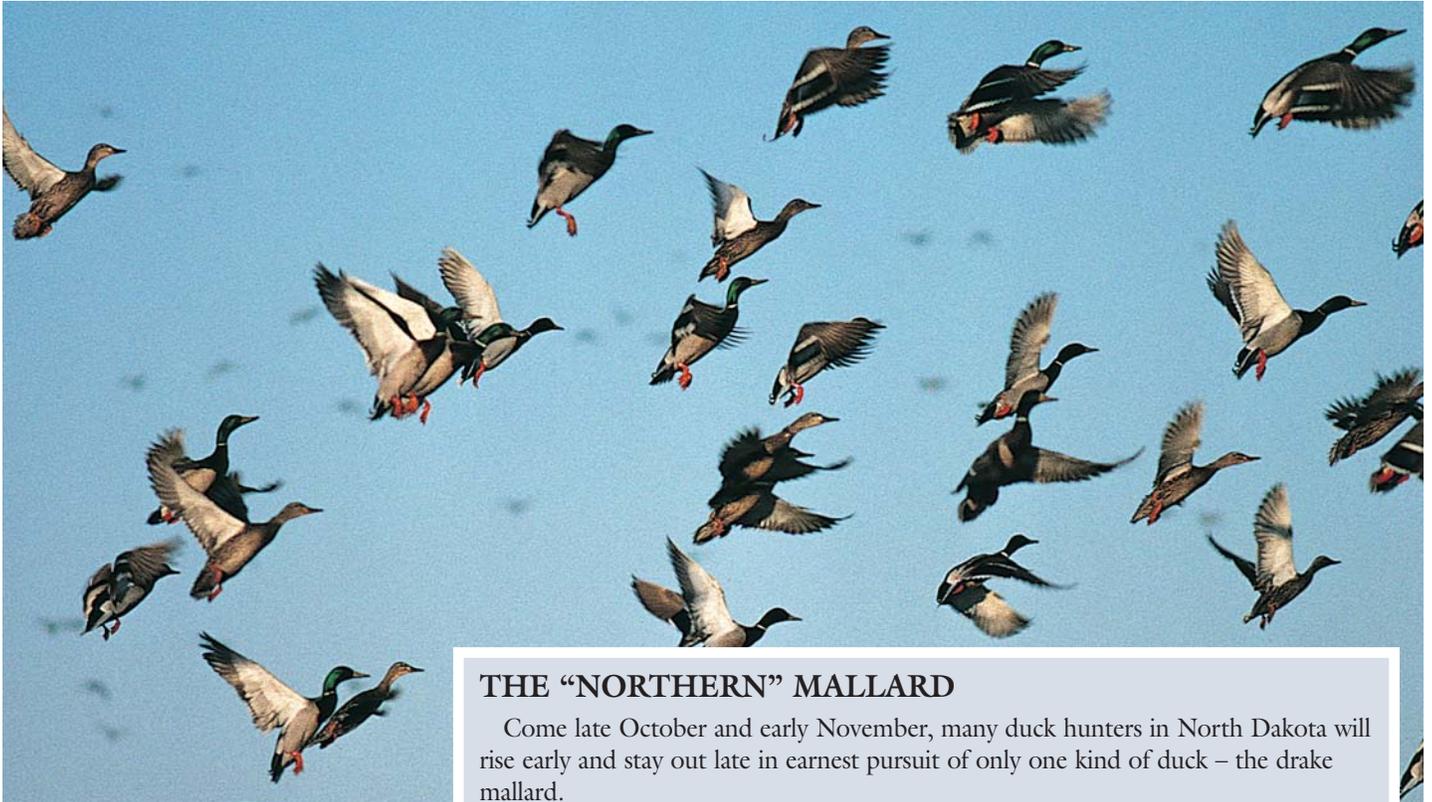


A CLOSER LOOK

Story by Craig Bihrlle



CRAIG BIHRLE

THE “NORTHERN” MALLARD

Come late October and early November, many duck hunters in North Dakota will rise early and stay out late in earnest pursuit of only one kind of duck – the drake mallard.

Not that drake mallards, affectionately called greenheads, aren't highly desirable earlier in the waterfowl season. They are. In fact, about 40-50 percent of all ducks harvested in North Dakota each year are mallards, and hunters in North Dakota bag about 2.5 drakes for every hen.

But earlier in the season there's this widespread perception that greenheads that aren't fully colored out, or only have half of one curly tail feather, are some kind of slightly inferior “local” duck. Later on, hunters assume all those immaculately plumaged drakes, the ones with a full set of full-curved tail feathers and not a pin-feather to be picked are “big northern mallards, down from Canada.”

That isn't necessarily the case. That fat, grain-fed greenhead that decoys just before deer season could just as well have been born and raised over the first hill to the west, instead of a thousand miles north on the Canadian prairie.

Think about it for a second. A drake mallard looks pretty much the same, whether it was raised in Canada or North Dakota. Young-of-the-year North Dakota birds might even have a slight edge in size and coloration because the nesting effort starts earlier here than it does farther north.

A recent study involving thousands of ducks banded in North Dakota and other Central Flyway states and Canadian provinces provides some insight. Since that study began, band recoveries indicate a solid majority of banded mallards shot in North Dakota early in the duck season were also banded in North Dakota.

However, after October 28, the proportion of birds recovered in North Dakota that were banded in Canada increased, but local birds were still well represented.

What that means is that there are still a lot of North Dakota-raised mallards in North Dakota in late October, despite the increased likelihood of shooting a mallard that's on its way down from Canada.

This fall, when the snow flies and you're out there after those “big northern mallards,” keep in mind there's a fair chance those birds you bag are not imports at all, but locally raised, prime North Dakota greenheads.

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